

Hard Choices in UK Public Policy – Railways

Mar 18 2010

No matter who forms the new government in May 2010, the new set of ministers will have to tackle the worst deficit in UK public finance for decades. The 2010 to 2015 period will inevitably require policy-makers and citizens to make some hard choices – either raising taxes or pruning spending on previously highly valued public services.

In the first of our 'Hard Choices' series, [Tim Leunig](#) argues that keeping underused railway stations open cannot be justified:



Whoever wins the next election needs to heed this (mis)quotation of Colbert's dictum about taxation: "The art of cutting spending consists in so plucking the goose as to obtain the largest possible amount of feathers with the smallest possible amount of hissing".

There are more than 175 railway stations in Britain that are used by fewer than 10 people a day. Another 450 more are used by fewer than 100 people a day. And an additional 725 stations are used by fewer than 500 people a day. In total, the least used 50 per cent of Britain's stations account for just 3 per cent of all rail journeys.

Keeping stations open is not costless. They need maintenance to comply with health and safety legislation, lighting after dark, and so on. Signalling needs to be maintained so that trains can stop at the station. And stopping and starting a train uses a lot of energy, just as stop-start urban car journeys use more fuel than travelling at a constant speed. Not stopping at little-used stations would also make journeys faster between stations that are more heavily used – so that the average passenger would get a better service.

Shutting stations is bad publicity. But giving them – and the obligation to pay for them as necessary – to cash-strapped local authorities would achieve the same thing while reducing and redirecting the hissing away from central government.

Lord Beeching (who cut the UK's railways system drastically in the early 1960s) was never a popular figure and not all of his cuts were well made. But he hugely reduced the cost of running the network, while eliminating very few journeys that were made by any number of people. We need him back once again!

*Tim Leunig is the author of "Post-World War II British Railways: The Unintended Consequences of Insufficient Government Intervention", in H. Margetts, C. Hood and Perri 6 (eds) *Paradoxes of Modernisation*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2010.*